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# “Queering the Rainbow Nation”: An Analysis of 11 Gay and Lesbian Capetonians’ Perceptions of LGBT Identity in Cape Town and the South African Government’s Commitment to LGBT Equality

Ryan Sasse

*SIT Study Abroad*

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“Queering the Rainbow Nation”:

An Analysis of 11 Gay and Lesbian Capetonians’ Perceptions of LGBT Identity in Cape Town  
and the South African Government’s Commitment to LGBT Equality

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Shifra Jacobson, Advisor

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for: South Africa – Multiculturalism and Human Rights

SIT Study Abroad, a Program for World Learning

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## Abstract

The South African government has made vast strides in the fight for LGBT equality, strides that are unparalleled by any other nation on the African continent. Unfortunately, the lack of hate crime legislation within the country—as well as the government’s unwillingness to address the nation’s resulting violence—often overshadows the accomplishments that have been made over the last few years. Keeping in mind that “[f]eminist research goals foster empowerment and emancipation for women and other marginalized groups, and feminist researchers often apply their findings in the service of promoting social justice for women,” we can see how the LGBT community is often one of these “marginalized groups” associated with feminist research (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007: 4). Although nearly all individuals within the LGBT community face some level of societal pressure and discrimination, this project is primarily concerned with the perceptions of gay and lesbian Capetonians regarding their feelings of safety and security living in South Africa and the political and social norms that influence such perceptions.

Consequently, I have used my research project to explore the gap that seems to exist between the expectations created by the South African government’s LGBT-inclusive constitutional protections and policies and the reality of the LGBT individual’s lived experience. By working directly with Cape Town’s LGBT population through a series of informal interviews, I feel I have gained a better insight into what it is like to be a LGBT person living in Cape Town amid an international movement to advance LGBT rights. This insight has laid the foundations for me to argue that the South African government’s seeming interest in LGBT rights is misleading and shaped by the heteronormativity that has emerged as a staple of contemporary culture’s discourse on issues of sexuality. Under the guidance of Shifra Jacobson, my approach has allowed me to work alongside current advocates and community workers to help facilitate a public discourse about how to address the nation’s human rights abuses more effectively. Perhaps more importantly, it has provided me with the

unique opportunity to challenge heteronormative social rules and ideologies that silence the experiences of the marginalized, a cornerstone of feminist and queer research.

## Introduction

In recent years, South Africa has emerged as a leader in the international fight for gay rights. The nation first made headlines among the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community in 1996 when it became the first nation in the world to constitutionally outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation. Then, in 2006, South Africa shocked the global community once again when it legalized same-sex marriage, the fifth nation in the world to do so and the first in Africa. Clearly, South Africa has been challenging common perceptions of African nations' intolerant beliefs about homosexuality through its recent constitutional and policy changes. But to what extent is it a reality?

On the surface, South Africa may seem like the model for progressive gay rights legislation. Yet when looking at the nation more closely, one can see that homophobia and sexism certainly still exist on nearly all levels of government. For example, South African President Jacob Zuma has been criticized by numerous LGBT advocacy organizations for his comments referring to same-sex marriage as "a disgrace to the nation and to God." Furthermore, since South Africa has no specific LGBT-inclusive hate crime legislation, many LGBT individuals are still subject to bias motivated crimes that often go unnoticed or unreported. Such crimes include, but are certainly not limited to, so-called "curative rapes" in which men sexually abuse lesbians in order to "cure" them of their homosexuality (Hunter-Gault 2012: 40). This forces us to question our understanding of "LGBT-friendly" legislation and the role that such legislation plays in the way a country is perceived on the global human rights stage. What factors are taken into account when governments decide (or do not decide) to adopt hate crime and anti-discrimination legislation for LGBT individuals and why are such factors influenced so heavily by norms, the media, and global approval?

A common concept in gender and sexuality studies is the idea of a cultural norm: agreed-upon expectations and rules by which a society—or in this case, a government—guides the behavior of its members in any given situation. Even though a cultural norm can certainly not be equated with

a cultural imperative, the plasticity of the human mind contributes to the degree of facility with which our minds can be altered by such norms, sometimes without an individual even realizing it (Narayan 1997: 95). As a result, socio-political norms and customs can be followed without second thought, causing the status quo to remain stagnant and potentially leading to issues such as “[i]gnorance, profound prejudice, distrust, suspicion, misinterpretation of motives, perversion of purposes, [and] incredible blindness to facts” (Yarros 1921: 213). This then prompts me to wonder whether governments and the citizens they aim to serve subconsciously internalize political norms and, by doing so, dictate our governmental and political expectations based upon a fabricated system of human rights standards that is sought after and upheld by the international community.

As the site of one of the world’s worst human rights abuses in human history, South Africa will provide the perfect lens with which to analyze contemporary human rights violations. The apartheid—an Afrikaans word meaning “separateness”—was a legal system whereby people were classified into racial groups: White, Black, Indian, and Coloured. These groups were then used to segregate South African people into separate geographic areas and justify treating certain demographics inhumanely. Apartheid laws played an integral role in determining South Africa’s legal framework from 1948 to 1994. Nonetheless, apartheid was not mentioned even once during my course of education up through high school.

How shocking it is to think that such a monumental period in South African history could be completely disregarded in American textbooks, forcing me to question which other monumental periods in history were left out of my high school textbooks as well. Consequently, I yearn to use my research project to not only explore human rights issues from a macro, transnational perspective but also to learn more about the specific constitutional protections and legislative policies of South Africa. In the process, I hope to become a better informed human rights advocate with a well-rounded base of knowledge about a greater variety of human rights issues.



My interests and passions in gender equality and human rights will be illuminated even further by pursuing such a project in a country where “non-sexism” is constitutionally considered a “fundamental value” of the state and where the ruling national legislative body has maintained a commitment to a minimal 30% quota for the representation of women at all levels since 1994. But despite such progressive policies, government response to violence against LGBT persons remains inadequate. The creation of a national task team—comprised of both government officials and LGBT community activists hoping to combat crimes against LGBT persons—is a step in the right direction and can provide some useful lessons for further collaboration between government and local organizations (Department of Justice, 2011). Nevertheless, a task team can only do so much if they are working under a governmental system that doesn’t protect the very people the task team is trying to protect.

Violence against LGBT persons must be addressed on a national level, with support locally. In fact, the international community is certainly beginning to take note of the problems associated with not addressing such violence in South Africa. In its Universal Periodic Review released in May 2012, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights discussed various issues facing the nation of South Africa and ways to address such issues. One of its first recommendations: “To enhance the prevention, investigation and prosecution of crimes of violence against individuals on the ground of their sexual orientation or gender identity and to publicly denounce such crimes” (Office of the High Commissioner, 2012). Clearly, the South African government’s general disregard for the safety of its LGBT citizens is receiving international attention. Going into my project, I aimed to discover how this is perceived at the local level in Cape Town and what effect (if any) such international attention may be having on the lives of Cape Town’s LGBT population.

## Literature Review

Scholarly works on queer theory and sexuality studies have formed the foundations of my research interests. Queer theory is a discipline which forces society to view the world from a different and sometimes uncomfortable perspective. In “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” Jose Esteban Munoz shows that when applied to the realm of sexuality, the case is no different. Queer theory challenges the popular understanding that sexuality is natural and biological, that people are born as gay or straight and that sexuality then remains stable for the rest of one’s life (Munoz 1996: 13). Rather than buy into this misconception of sexuality as a biological binary, feminist research has employed queer theory to suggest that sexuality is a spectrum in which one’s position on that spectrum can fluctuate over time. And since sexualities continuously change as people are exposed to new social stimuli, queer theory has helped feminist research view sexuality not as natural but rather as a socially constructed phenomenon.

Given feminist research’s concern about drawing on the experiences and knowledge of the marginalized, it becomes obvious why queerness can then help feminist researchers better produce and sustain knowledge about such groups. For example, “Judith Halberstam’s work reminds us that even a queer archive can stand to be pushed beyond its parameters” (Munoz 1996: 13). In her article “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” Halberstam challenges a generally accepted lesbian history that often excludes the so-called “stone butch” (Halberstam 1998: 287). Her work proves that queerness can help push even the queerest of disciplines to new extremes, helping to give a greater variety of individuals a voice in feminist research. This is what I aim to do with my own project: help research on sexuality move away from relying exclusively on the voice of the white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class woman and man.

In my research project, queer theory and the foundations laid by theorists like Halberstam will serve as a lens into better understanding LGBT life in Cape Town. Significant scholarly research has already focused on the beginnings of the gay and lesbian liberation movement in South Africa. In

my opinion, one of the most useful teaching tools that has been produced from this research is the short video “Simon & I,” which recounts the experiences of black South African gay rights activist Simon Nkoli, who died of AIDS in 1998, and his fellow activist and protégé, Bev Ditsie. Not only was Nkoli one of the founders of the first black-led LGBT organization in Africa, the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), but he also initiated the first gay and lesbian pride march in South Africa (Gevisser and Cameron 1995: 15). Nkoli helped make the gay rights movement and the anti-apartheid movement one struggle, thus ensuring gays and lesbians would be legally recognized in the new South Africa, where, in Nkoli’s words, “everybody has equal rights and everybody is protected by the law.” This is the mentality that fueled the passage of South Africa’s groundbreaking LGBT-friendly legislation, propelling the nation to the forefront of the global community’s fight for LGBT equality.

With this in mind, it is quite clear that Nkoli truly helped lay the foundations for the modern-day LGBT equality movement in South Africa by queering—that is, forcing people to look at something from a different angle or perspective—the way South Africans view sexuality and the legal protections associated with it. I hope to use my research to explore the movement he created to greater depths. This research will be illuminated even further by existing literature on African sexualities. Novels such as *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, for example, have provided me with a clearer conception of the so-called social “taboos” and “sensitive issues” associated with the lingering and evolving discrimination problems in post-apartheid South Africa. Many of these taboos center around issues of gender and sexuality, issues which are often seen as “un-African,” imported from Western influences and colonialism (Mpe 2011: 24).

The idea of cultural importation is present in numerous scholarly works. For instance, in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Sylvia Tamale explores the plurality of sexualities present on the African continent through a series of contributions from African writers and thinkers. In one chapter in particular, “Sexual orientation and human rights: putting homophobia on trial,” Makau Mutua discusses

the topics of African homosexuality and LGBT advocacy. As Mutua points out, South Africa's "enlightened approach" to LGBT rights has yet to be replicated by any other African country. Nonetheless, it has set a precedent for the advancement of LGBT equality throughout the continent, proving that "[i]t is fair to argue that the protection of other forms of sexual orientation besides heterosexuality [...] is an emerging international norm" (Tamale 2011: 458).

This notion of LGBT rights as a global norm has emerged as a hot topic among the world's top news sources as well. Its coverage in mainstream international newspapers and magazines highlights the fact that South Africa's role in the global fight for equality is exceeding far beyond the realm of academia. In fact, it has become quite a germane topic among both scholarly works and news sources alike. The buzz first began in 2011 when South Africa introduced the first-ever U.N. resolution on the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons to the United Nations Human Rights Council. Despite objections from other African nations, a CNN article covering the groundbreaking news explains that the resolution passed, confirming the U.N.'s commitment to the growing idea that "gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights" (Dougherty 2011). South Africa's role in the proliferation of this idea continued just a couple months later in December 2011. In a speech by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Geneva, the Obama administration announced that it will use all diplomatic means to promote gay rights around the world, particularly in Africa. In an article from *The Atlantic*, John Campbell, a former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria and a senior fellow for African policy at the *Council on Foreign Relations*, reflects on the Obama administration's bold declaration and points out how South Africa is the exception among a stream of African nations who oppose passing LGBT rights legislation. According to Campbell, many see President Obama's decision as an imposition of Western norms. But "as former president Jimmy Carter's sponsorship of human rights shows, new norms can over time influence the behavior of governments" (Campbell 2011). Thus, there is a strong hope among many developed nations such as the United States, as well as among many extremely powerful and influential international organi-

zations, that growing acceptance of human rights norms will prompt governments to make corresponding legal changes in their respective countries.

So when looking at the impact of feminist research and queer theory on the law, it can be seen that the work of feminist researchers has helped make the law better equipped to satisfy the needs of women and other marginalized groups, thus improving the quality of their lives. But we must remember that not only does law shape culture, but culture also shapes law. According to Susan Appleton, there are two primary ways to study law: studying law in the books and studying law in action (Appleton 2012: 1428). Although studying law in the books teaches researchers about the basics of law, it is studying law in action that allows researchers to examine how a specific law—or in my case, the lack of a specific law—creates a particular change in society.

A May 2012 article in *The New Yorker* magazine uses South Africa as a case study to explore this phenomenon described by Appleton. As the article points out, “South Africa, with a population of fifty million, has one of the highest rates of violence in the world—more than forty murders a day, on average—and the highest rate of rape” (Hunter-Gault 2012: 40). Despite protections for LGBT persons built into the constitution, at least thirty-one lesbians have been killed since 1998 in attacks that were motivated by their sexual orientation, many of which began with corrective rape (Hunter-Gault 2012: 40). In its March 2009 report *Hate Crimes: The Rise of ‘Corrective’ Rape in South Africa*, ActionAid summarizes the legislation that has been passed regarding hate crimes in the country and the overwhelming need for its expansion:

The Equality Act, passed in 2000, specifically outlaws so-called ‘hate crimes’, where people are targeted purely because of their identification as part of a group. Although in theory this includes crimes on the basis of sexual orientation, in practice the only cases that have been brought to trial are on the basis of race and gender. (Martin et.al. 2009: 8)

Keeping the study of law in action in mind, it is clear that South Africa’s recent legislative changes prove how a lack of social change can shape how people understand—and come to expect changes in—legislation regarding equality (Campbell 2011). It is this increased expectation of equality throughout society that then leads to legal changes that better the lives of marginalized groups.

As helpful as these scholarly works and news sources have been in providing me with a better understanding of the roles feminist thought and queer theory play in shaping norms about gender and sexuality in South African society, they have not provided me adequate insight into the lived experiences of Cape Town's LGBT population.

The only work I have encountered that comes close to this goal is *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, in which Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron present a collection of narratives told by gay and lesbian South Africans. Published in March 1994, just before South Africans went to the polls in the nation's first democratic election, the book serves as a testimony of gay and lesbian experiences during the apartheid. The book explains how South Africa is the first nation in the world to constitutionally protect gay and lesbian people. This protection is found in Section 8 of the Chapter on Fundamental Rights, which outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. But as Gevisser and Cameron rightly point out, "[c]onstitutional equality by no means guarantees an end to social discrimination" (Gevisser and Cameron 1994: ix). This gap that the editors allude to—a gap between South Africa's constitutional protections and the reality of the LGBT individual's lived experience—is exactly what I hope to explore in my Independent Study Project. Gevisser and Cameron seem to have produced the first work that uses real LGBT South Africans' personal experiences as a lens into the progression of the LGBT equality movement in the country.

Due to taboos surrounding the discussion of issues of sexuality in South Africa, such a book simply wouldn't have been able to be published any earlier, especially during apartheid. Perhaps more importantly, gays and lesbians would probably have had much more inhibitions about discussing their experiences had the editors undertaken this endeavor any earlier. But despite the groundbreaking nature of the editors' work, fact still remains that the book was published nearly two decades ago. So although the book does offer a fantastic look into the lives of LGBT South Africans during apartheid, it does not reveal much, if anything, about LGBT life in post-apartheid South Africa. This room for growth and further research is what I hope to capitalize on when writing my own ISP.

It is these post-apartheid lived experiences of South African gays and lesbians that I truly hope to explore with my research project. It is through “site-based learning and methods” that a researcher can best connect with individuals on a personal and intimate level. Making such connections is one of the major goals of my research, and so my methods aim to capitalize on this idea of “site-based, experiential learning.”

## **Methodology and Ethical Reflexivity**

The resources that SIT has provided for me throughout the course of the semester (e.g. connections with locals, background knowledge of the area, etc.) allowed me to hit the ground running. I began my research by looking into local LGBT advocacy organizations in Cape Town. With Shifra's help, I identified numerous LGBT organizations and hotlines that could assist me in gaining a better understanding of gay life in Cape Town. The Triangle Project, for example, is a local organization which aims to challenge homophobia in order to encourage others to appreciate sexual diversity. I had hoped that organizations such as The Triangle Project would prove to be major resources in my research by providing me with discrimination and hate crime statistics and informing me of local LGBT events occurring in the area. Unfortunately, making contact with such organizations proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated. As a result, I relied mostly on mutual connections with friends, as well as connections I had made by attending events such as pride festivals and public education and training sessions, to meet local LGBT people and ask them to participate in my research as informants.

After becoming more acquainted with LGBT life in Cape Town, I conducted personal, one-on-one interviews with some of the people I met. This was singlehandedly the best way to gain insight into the daily experiences of LGBT individuals living in Cape Town. Through a series of open-ended questions, I hoped to learn about real people's personal experiences and opinions, experiences and opinions that often substantiated the statistics I had already begun exploring online before my research even began. Each open interview lasted roughly 45 minutes, which gave informants enough time to gather their thoughts and express their beliefs instead of limiting themselves to simply "yes" or "no" answers. The names of my informants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Besides offering to buy informants a cup of tea or lunch, I offered no monetary compensation for the interviews so each informant had equal incentive to participate. Participants did, however, need to fill out and sign a consent form in order to participate in my research. This consent



form helped ensure each informant knows that participation in my research is completely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw consent at any time. I made sure to list the objectives of my research on the consent form as well as the types of topics my research is exploring. During the interview, informants were asked questions such as:

Do you feel safe living in Cape Town as a member of the LGBT community? Why or why not?  
 How do you think your gender identity impacts your feeling of safety?  
 How do you think your sexual identity impacts your feeling of safety?  
 What role do you think the South African government plays in your feeling of safety?  
 What about the local government?  
 What are the steps you see as necessary for the government to take to help you feel safer?  
 Do you feel like the government is invested in your safety?  
 Do you think hate crime legislation would help protect LGBT South Africans? How so?  
 What role do local community organizations play in protecting LGBT individuals?  
 How would you respond to someone who said that homosexuality is “un-African”?

While some of the questions above may seem to stray away from the core of my hypothesis, the answers given were often tied to the societal expectations people have of their government and how one’s gender and sexual identity impacts such expectations, even though this may not be referenced directly in the original question. In addition, many answers given highlighted the general importance of norms and rules (i.e. gender, sexuality, political, etc.) in people’s lives and showcased the interconnected nature and intersectionality both within and between informants’ answers.

In a country as diverse as South Africa, I certainly recognized going into my research that I needed to account for the race and socioeconomic class of my informants while conducting interviews. This is particularly true when considering that gay rights is often deemed a “white issue” in the country, a label that represents a history of tension between LGBT activists who wanted to side with the liberation struggle and those who wanted to focus exclusively on LGBT rights within white apartheid politics (Campbell 2011). Yet since I did not fully understand the resources and connections available to me as a foreigner conducting research in South Africa until my research actually began, I believed it would be an injustice to my project to limit the number of informants I interviewed based upon their race and/or socioeconomic class simply in order to fulfill some sort of quota

or expectation. Finding informants to interview is a difficult enough process in and of itself. Furthermore, language barriers very well could have limited the number of people I could interview. Although I could have been able to circumnavigate this obstacle through the use of a translator, finding a translator who was available to help me with my research, as well as finding the funds to pay the translator, proved to be an even greater obstacle. In addition, using a translator can pose its own ethical dilemmas, particularly when finding a direct translation between the researcher's language and the informant's language is simply not possible. Thus, all of my informants were proficient in English.

Despite these challenges, I still believe interviews were the best way to gather accounts of personal experiences that gave me valuable insight into the thoughts and opinions of gay and lesbian Capetonians. Therefore, I aimed to be as open and flexible as possible when choosing my informants in order to obtain a greater diversity of opinions and ideas—a diversity that greatly influences the level of credibility and legitimacy present in one's research. Consequently, race and socioeconomic class have served as comparative analytical categories which I have employed to look for continuities within and between my informants' responses.

In the end, my research attracted eleven Capetonians, four lesbian women and seven gay men. These eleven respondents included two white Afrikaners, Anne Marie and Johan, two white Jewish individuals, David and Susan, and a white student at the University of Cape Town, Stephen. In order to get the most diverse responses possible, I also interviewed three Coloured individuals, Oscar, Mareldia, and Ronel, as well as three black individuals living in townships, Nontombi, Phumzile, and Siya.

My methods most closely resemble an ethnographic approach to research. As a core component of anthropological research, ethnographies focus on a particular individual in a specific time and place. Feminist epistemologists in particular aim to explore knowledge from an individual's perspective, a goal based on the assumption that understanding an individual's experience and perspective is

a type of desired knowledge (Buch and Staller 2007: 194). This epistemology claims that knowledge is individual because it is based on social constructions and biases. Therefore, ethnographers accept that knowledge is culturally and historically situated, so they aim to gain a better understanding of knowledge from the perspective of a particular, often marginalized situation. Moreover, my methods were certainly inspired by a transnational approach to feminist and queer research. The power relations that shape gender and sexuality are themselves transnational. Since nobody is an individual in a social vacuum, we must realize that we are part of a global community, not on top of a global community. My research hopes to capitalize on this idea in order to better understand how these transnational power relations play out within the context of Cape Town and South Africa more generally.

Going into my research, I also recognized that there was a possibility I would discover that gay and lesbian Capetonians may feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions about gender and sexuality in an interview to a stranger, potentially due to the social taboos surrounding the discussion of these topics. As a result, I decided that should this happen, I would create a survey in which gay men and women could anonymously answer the same questions that I planned to ask in my interviews. The survey would have probably been disseminated by way of the internet and various social networking sites such as Facebook. I decided that if I did need to conduct a survey, I would take advantage of any connections made with local community organizations and ask them to distribute the survey in order to ensure I receive a diverse group of respondents. Plus, the survey would have offered no compensation so each respondent would have equal incentive to participate. Through this process, I recognized that my informants may be more likely to provide thoughtful, authentic answers to my questions due to the increased comfort of filling out the survey on their own time, in a setting of their own choosing. In addition, an online survey would have drastically increased the confidentiality of the informants' answers, providing them with the opportunity of hiding behind the anonymity of their computer screens. Despite this, my interviews proved to be extremely successful in gaining truthful answers to my questions, so creating a survey was not necessary.

My methods were crafted while keeping in mind the postmodern understanding that all epistemologies are historically and culturally constructed. After understanding this assumption, it can be seen that conceptions of “knowledge” are constructed by cultural values and assumptions, and thus all researchers—myself included—carry world views and biases that impact their research and understanding of knowledge. This leaves room to question whether these biases inhibit or enhance the production of knowledge. Many feminist researchers claim that the positionality and experience of researchers should be embraced as something that may enhance their work and inspire them. However, they also emphasize the importance of addressing and analyzing one’s own biases (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007: 12). My positionality as a young, gay, white, American student certainly needed to be kept in mind throughout the course of my research. “But this in turn may suggest some ways in which the particular obliquities of my approach to the subject[s] may bias what I [found] there” (Sedgwick 1999: 339). At the beginning of my research, I realized that such a bias could have certainly impacted who was willing to be one of my informants as well as what my informants would be willing to say to me. As frustrating as this may be, remaining cognizant of it and addressing this bias explicitly has allowed me to become more “contextually self-conscious” about the features of my own identity that shape the way I engage with issues in a different national context (Narayan 1997: 95). It is my goal that this attitude and mindset will help make me not only a more informed researcher but a more credible and reliable researcher as well.

Moreover, my approach has fit into the “postmodern emphasis on bringing the ‘other’ into the research process” that has emerged as a hallmark of feminist research (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007: 20). One of the largest challenges I have faced in this regard is an ethical issue. How can I—or any feminist researcher for that matter—ethically label someone or something as “the other” without creating a hierarchical structure of power within my research? Perhaps more importantly, how can I adequately represent the voice of the other once this hierarchical power structure has already been created and not allow this voice to become a generalization about an entire population? As Anne

Opie explains in “Qualitative Research, Appropriation of the ‘Other’ and Empowerment,” “developing new knowledge in an established field requires modifying the conventional textual practices in that field particularly as those practices constitute a colonizing or appropriative relationship between the researcher and the participants in the research” (Opie 2008: 365). So when studying the other, a sense of privilege clearly comes into play. As I have learned, however, the important thing is not to ignore this privilege, but rather to acknowledge its existence and take steps to reduce its impact on the efficacy of research. Of course, doing so is not an easy task, highlighting why this issue continues to pose such a challenge to researchers from a wide variety of disciplines.

Finally, coming to South Africa, I recognized that my approach could have proven to be highly unrealistic once my research actually began. Furthermore, when understanding the importance of maintaining objectivity in “assessing hypotheses and theories in an unbiased and unprejudiced manner,” I realized that I could have run into certain unanticipated biases that would potentially alter my methods once my ethnographic research commenced (Longino 2008: 391). My research project has been a new initiative. And just like with any new initiative, a researcher must be flexible, which is why I thought of a back-up plan of using surveys in case my interviews proved to be unsuccessful. Nonetheless, it was this acceptance of the difficulties I would potentially face and this understanding of the potential need to completely change my approach that ultimately resulted in a more cohesive and thought-provoking project.

## Limitations of Study

One of the most pertinent limitations on my research was time constraints. Learning how to navigate one's way through Cape Town's LGBT community in just one month is certainly not an easy task. Furthermore, trying to find enough informants who represent a wide array of experiences to adequately conduct a holistic research project was also a challenge. This is particularly true given the great diversity within Cape Town's own LGBT community. It is quite difficult to make any generalizations regarding the "LGBT experience" in Cape Town. As a result, I aimed to interview LGBT individuals from a diversity of racial, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Yet making connections with so many different types of communities in order to find informants to interview was very time consuming in and of itself. However, the more people I spoke with the more names I received of other people who were interested in speaking with me. Unfortunately, given the time constraints on the project, some individuals were simply not available to meet until after the conclusion of the ISP period.

In addition, being a student who is heavily invested in the LGBT equality movement in the United States, both academically and professionally, I have a clear bias toward promoting advocacy and activism both on a grassroots and national level. This became most noticeable when I interviewed persons who seemed quite comfortable with the state of LGBT equality in South Africa and did not suggest any changes that needed to be made, but on the whole I do not think this bias was strong enough to negatively impact my research. Another limitation I faced was that I only had access to those gay and lesbian individuals who considered themselves to be "out." As a result, these were individuals who, in general, were quite comfortable with their sexual identities, which offered a different perspective from what I would have encountered had I interviewed only people who were still, either intentionally or forcibly, "closeted." Finally, my experiences in Cape Town have proven that lesbians tend to be a demographic that is much less publicly visible than their gay male counterparts. Consequently, I found it more difficult to make connections with and interview lesbian women,

resulting in a slight imbalance between the number of gay men and lesbians represented in my research.

## Glossary

1. “curative” or “corrective” rape: an act of rape committed against a woman who is or is perceived to be a lesbian in order to “cure” her of her homosexuality
2. heteronormativity: the idea, dominating most societies, that heterosexuality is the only “normal” sexual orientation, only sexual or marital relations between women and men are acceptable, and each sex has certain natural roles in life, so-called gender roles
3. LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
4. moffietaal: Afrikaans for “homosexual language”; developed in the drag culture of the Cape Coloured community in the 1950s and sometimes still used today; also referred to as “Gayle”
  - Below are some slang “Gayle” terms I encountered during my interviews:
    - barbara: straight man
    - betty: black person
    - chlora: coloured person
    - lettie: lesbian
    - mary: obvious homosexual
    - moffie: derogatory term for a gay man
    - patsy: dance, party
    - rita: rent boy
5. queer (identity): a way of identifying sexual orientation as non-normative and non-heterosexual; it is often used as an umbrella term for the LGBT community but can also be used as a verb, meaning to disrupt normativity and analyze something from a different perspective



## Research Findings and Analysis

Upon reviewing the responses of the eleven informants, some clear themes regarding LGBT life in Cape Town certainly emerged. On the whole, however, it seems quite difficult to make any generalizations of my informants' responses based upon just one of their identities. When recognizing, in Stuart Hall's words, that "...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past," this paper aims to analyze how gay and lesbian Capetonians' sexual identities in particular situate them within a domestic and international LGBT equality movement. By comparing the answers of each of the respondents, I hope to highlight the fact that our identities are shaped by larger social narratives and that we, as human beings, are sometimes not even conscious of these narratives. "Such narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct an homogenized 'right way' to be its member" (Yuval-Davis 2006: 195). Nonetheless, a sole identity cannot single-handedly determine a person's response to an event or circumstance. As Kristina Bentley and Adam Habib point out in *Racial Redress*, "no identity is self-enclosed" (Bentley and Habib 2008: 10). Rather, narratives are guided by a complex interaction between one's multiple identities, identities that rarely can be separated from one another. It is this intersectionality of one's identities—as well as the effect it has on one's experience of and opinions regarding any given situation or circumstance—that forms the major source of analysis for this paper.

### I. Racial and Class Segregation within the LGBT Community

One of the most common themes I encountered during my interviews is the racial and class component of being a member of the LGBT community in Cape Town. Racial categories have played an integral role in shaping the history of South Africa. This was probably most notable under apartheid, which institutionalized already established racial groups in the country. Apartheid laws

came to a close in 1994. But even today, the racial terms used during apartheid still impact the way South Africans perceive their own identity as well as the identities of others.

“Categorical attributes are often used for the construction of inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries that differentiate between self and other, determining what is ‘normal’ and what is not” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199). In South Africa, these boundaries are quite evident in the experiences of LGBT people. When it comes to the identity of gay and lesbian individuals in particular, the ambiguous and fluid understanding of what it even means to be gay in South Africa creates narratives that are all quite historically contextual. This context, combined with the marginality often associated with LGBT identity due to heteronormative gender norms that restrict self-expression, constructs narratives that are guided by a complex interaction between one’s multiple identities, identities that rarely can be separated from one another. This section aims to explore that interaction and analyze the impact it has on one’s perception of LGBT identity in Cape Town.

### *Self-Expression and Dating*

This phenomenon was most contextualized through my interviews with coloured and black gay men and lesbians, demographics which seem to have more stereotypes associated with them in South African gay culture. As Oscar, a self-identified coloured gay man in his mid-20s, pointed out: “If you’re gay and black or gay and coloured there’s this expectation almost of you to be feminine [...] I don’t see how black or coloured gay guys could or would only be one way. Whereas there’s almost a broader scope for gay identity with white gay guys.”

This stereotype probably stems from coloured gay men’s long history of involvement in South Africa’s drag community. This involvement has caused many coloured gay men in particular to be labeled as a so-called “moffie.” As Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron explain in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, “in South African slang, the word ‘moffie’ covers a range of interrelated senses, including ‘male homosexual’, ‘effeminate male’ and ‘transvestite’. In its most widespread usage, it refers to the first category, but its more specific meaning of ‘transvestite’ is also

found in the Cape coloured community” (Gevisser and Cameron 1995: ix). Interestingly enough, there seems to be no white equivalent of moffie. Thus, the existence of such a well-known and accepted stereotype within nonwhite LGBT communities provides coloured and black gay men with yet another set of expectations and norms to contend with, expectations and norms that they can either conform to or completely rebel against. But whatever relationship coloured and gay men choose to have with the confines created by the moffie stereotype, fact remains that this is a relationship white gay men do not even have to consider.

This certainly spills over into the dating scene within the gay and lesbian community as well. Siya, a self-identified gay black man, spoke about this in depth: “In most cases, when you’re gay and black—gay, black, young—people have this perception or maybe this mentality that you’re after money...if I would date a white person, people would automatically say that I am after his money or after something else or that I don’t love the person or something.” This seemed to be a trend among the nonwhite gay men I spoke with. Of the four coloured and black gay men I interviewed, three discussed the racialized aspect of gay night life in Cape Town. All three stated that they would have increased inhibitions approaching a white man in a club or bar.

### *White Privilege and LGBT Identity*

But self-expression is not the only aspect of sexuality that seems to differentiate the white LGBT experience from that of coloureds and blacks. Nontombi, a self-identified lesbian Xhosa woman, added to this idea by focusing on her sense of security as a black lesbian, saying:

“I would feel more safe if I was a white lesbian. [The white community] has been open-minded to so many things and familiar with so many things. Whereas with us that’s not the case. We haven’t had much luxury or whatever so it’s still going to take time for us to understand [...] Things have been so easy for [whites], things have been easy, and for us things have always been difficult. So that’s why I think for them they would be more understanding than us.”

Nontombi is certainly alluding to a certain amount of privilege that comes with being white in South African society. Susan, a self-identified white lesbian in her 60s, speculates as to where this

sense of white privilege stems from: “I just think the material power, the visibility of white people on television, in the media, in politics...has made it easier—a little bit easier—for white people to be out.” Nonetheless, Susan seems to be an anomaly among whites for recognizing this. “Despite the key role whites have played historically in the original construction and the replication of racial categories, they often claim today to be beyond race—to be color-blind and not to think about race” (Lewis 2004: 624).

The responses of Anne Marie, a self-identified white Afrikaner woman also in her 60s, offer a completely different opinion than the responses of Susan. Of course, one white person’s view on something does not represent a generic view of an entire race of people. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Anne Marie does not see her white identity as particularly important, potentially indicating that she does not fully understand the role whites play as racial actors in South African society. This is why many have come “to see [...] privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which [one] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [one] was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (McIntosh 2008: 7). Ever since youth, “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (McIntosh 2008: 7). For the purposes of this paper, the “whites” mentioned above can also be equated with heterosexuals. For white people, exposure to different ways of life can be viewed as “unearned assets” that they often take advantage of—consciously or not—due to their privileged status in society, an unearned asset that Nontombi is certainly quite aware of on a daily basis.

Sadly, many white individuals—especially straight white individuals—in South African society fail to recognize their own privilege or even attempt to put themselves into a coloured or black person’s shoes. This is particularly problematic when recognizing that “the chief obstacle to evolutionary progress in modern society is isolation—individual, group, and class isolation” (Yarros 1921: 211). Without exposure to other lifestyles, one can never truly understand the role societal norms play in facilitating the development of prejudicial attitudes. The only way to counter isolation and

break down barriers and rules that cause prejudice is through direct personal contact, which is extremely difficult in a city as racially segregated as Cape Town, where many whites have never even ventured into the black townships (Yarros 1921: 212). This is perhaps put best by Dr. Michael S. Kimmel, Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, in a recent lecture: “It is a luxury not to have to think about race, or class, or gender. Only those marginalized by some category understand how powerful that category is when deployed against them” (Kimmel 2001). In a culture that is dominated by conformity, it becomes obvious that these stereotypes, generalizations, and conventional notions need to be broken in order to form healthier relationships and identities, uninhibited by the stresses of societal pressure. Racial identities in South Africa are social identities. Whether they are accepted or dismissed, they are omnipresent, dominating the ways in which individuals perceive their own roles in social society as well as the roles of others.

### *Barriers Created by Socioeconomic Class*

When asked about the root causes of racial divisions among Cape Town’s LGBT community, a clear majority of the respondents mentioned socioeconomic class. Even though race tends to dominate conversations about privilege in South Africa, it is certainly not the only factor that needs to be considered. “Related to race—and indeed largely commensurate with it in South Africa—is economic and social class, which can prove equally divisive, as ‘people on opposite sides of the socioeconomic divide [are often] incapable of understanding and empathizing with one another’” (Bentley and Habib 2008: 8). In fact, Ronel, a self-identified coloured gay man, highlighted this divide by saying: “For white gay men [...] the experiences that I share and what they share are like two different experiences. First of all, money seems to buy certain respect in certain areas.” Ronel went on to tell me about his friend whose father owns the national brand of the country’s electricity. When describing him, Ronel quite bluntly said: “He’s white...and he’s rich, so for him to be gay is like nothing. People would like him because he has money so it doesn’t matter what [being gay] means.” According to Ronel, his friend’s class identity seems to trump his sexual identity since wealth is so valued

and respected in Cape Town, especially among LGBT circles. As a result, money becomes a safety net of sorts, allowing one to use their wealth to shield themselves from potential dangers.

Oscar builds on this by blaming poverty as the primary cause of the discrepancy between LGBT whites' and blacks' feelings of comfort and security in Cape Town:

“It’s probably just a class thing. If you’re earning more and you’re more educated...if you live in your own house and have your own room and you have the time to think things through, it’s different than if you share a room with other people and you have no time to figure stuff out for yourself. I mean [realizing you’re gay] is a big thing to figure out, and you probably just look around and start acting like the gay guys around you.”

Oscar definitely brings up an important point. Close living quarters in the black townships often makes it significantly more difficult for black LGBT persons to come out and express their sexuality openly. Consequently, many nonwhite LGBT persons are forced to be quite secretive about their sexualities. This seems to be something that has already emerged as an issue of concern within LGBT circles. When speaking about the tight living conditions in Cape Town’s townships, David, a self-identified white gay man who serves as the director of a prominent Jewish organization in Cape Town, asked the question: “How do you have a relationship? You have to move out of the area in order to have a relationship. There are many cases where people have to leave their homes, their families, their social structures in order to live their lives as LGBT people. And that’s really horrible and terrible.”

This phenomenon was confirmed by Phumzile, a self-identified gay black man, who told me that public bath houses have become quite popular among black gay men in particular who feel like they cannot bring a man home with them. Yet it’s not only important to understand why nonwhite gay men are often forced out of their home communities to seek sexual pleasure elsewhere, but also the ramifications of it. The use of public bath houses and so-called “rent boys” place these men at great risk. It’s quite a sad irony that in an effort to be more safe and escape the prejudices and homophobia rampant in their home communities, these gay men often just place themselves in even more dangerous situations, situations that white gay men of higher socioeconomic classes generally never

experience. Phumzile then elaborated on this by explaining how critical where an LGBT person lives—something that is largely determined by one's socioeconomic class—is in determining that individual's sense of security:

“I think [one's feeling of safety] depends on where you're staying [...] living in a township I might not feel 100% safe because there still is some stigma against gay and lesbian people in the townships [...] For example, I can't walk during the night in the townships and expose myself as I'm gay because there are so many violent things that might happen. There are so many cases of lesbians and gay people getting killed, especially in the townships. So it depends on which kind of environment you're living in I would say.”

When asked about what kinds of environments he considers to be safe, he quickly said the suburbs. I originally perceived the suburbs to be anywhere outside the city centre, but then Phumzile clarified: “No no no, maybe higher class apartments or whatever. Or in the southern white suburbs. But definitely not in the townships.” Phumzile's responses thus showcase the intimate connection between class and space in Cape Town and how nonwhite LGBT individuals often become victims of structural systems of poverty that force them to occupy certain unsafe spaces.

But my black respondents were not the only ones to make this connection. It was recognized by some white respondents as well. Johan, a self-identified white gay professor at a local university, seemed to place significant emphasis on privileged space. Recognizing his own positionality in LGBT circles, he noted: “The level of safety that I experience is based largely upon the places where I move, which are spaces of privilege. And those spaces afford me the luxury to feel safe and not to feel threatened. And I've realized that is not the case for most South Africans.”

Thus, race and class both play integral roles in shaping the experiences of LGBT individuals living in Cape Town. Although it is quite difficult to make generalizations about any given Cape Town LGBT experience based on just one of these identities, some common themes can be found. Such themes seem to center around the structural disadvantages that race and class bestow onto coloured and black LGBT individuals in particular. Such disadvantages not only impact the ways in which LGBT individuals can express their sexuality, but also their feelings of safety and general well

being. The next section will look at how lesbians in particular are disadvantaged by these oppressive structures.

## **II. The Lesbian Experience: Where is the “L” in LGBT?**

In South Africa, the daily experience of lesbians seems to be much less talked about than that of their gay male counterparts. As Susan noted: “I think gay women generally are invisibilized in that it doesn’t cross people’s minds that someone could be gay if they don’t look a certain way. It doesn’t even cross people’s minds...because people know very little about women together and women having sex together.” It thus seems as though LGBT visibility in Cape Town is reserved for only those individuals who fit within the confines of a normative perception of gayness—a perception typically tied to identifying as white, male, and middle-to-upper class. This section aims to compare the experiences of gay men and lesbians living in Cape Town. More specifically, it will look at the hate crimes faced by lesbian women in particular and the potential motivations behind such horrendous acts of violence.

### *The Patriarchal Influence of Gender Norms*

Strict gender norms pervade many communities in South Africa. Such norms tend to privilege men and thus inherently disadvantage women. This seems to be true within the LGBT community in Cape Town as well. But for Cape Town’s lesbian population, patriarchal gender norms not only seem to oppress women, but also place them in a great amount of danger. Of the seven gay men I interviewed, five explicitly said that they would be more fearful of their safety if they were a lesbian. When I asked why, David responded:

“Lesbian women I think have a particularly bad time [...] there’s something about the relationship between South African men and women in a society which is dominated by a male narrative, and where men are the center of their society and where women are very much second-rate citizens and are there for procreation and for care of the household, and that the respect for women is at such a low ebb in society and therefore a woman who holds control over her sexual organs in the sense that she says that they are mine and they are not for men, that becomes a challenge. And so you have this ghastly term ‘corrective rape’ which is part of the experience.”



Oscar seems to agree that lesbians have a more difficult time than gay men protecting themselves from violence. He echoed David's sentiments by saying: "As a woman in South Africa it's bad enough. It's dangerous enough. But if you stick out, like you automatically have a target on your head." As a Xhosa lesbian woman, Nontombi certainly knows what it feels like to—in Oscar's words—have a target on your head:

"As a woman you're seen as someone who's supposed to be in the kitchen, not dating another girl [...] the fact that I'm lesbian, I'm staying in a township, and also having my own place, also having my own car, that intimidates men. And they tend to think that you are attracting these girls because you have these things as well [...] those are things that in the township we would say put you in danger more than anything else."

When asked why these things put lesbian women in danger, Nontombi responded that men's egos play a large role, largely because men—especially those who are unemployed in the townships—don't want to see a woman doing everything that they're supposed to be doing better than they're doing it themselves. Thus, lesbians often intimidate men and are seen as a threat, a threat that needs to be contained. Consequently, they frequently are at risk of falling victim to men's aggression. Based on my interviews, it seems as if some lesbian women are quite aware of this risk and sometimes choose to fade into the background of society because of it.

### *The Dangers of Curative Rapes*

As David noted above, so-called "corrective" or "curative" rapes have become intimately associated with the lesbian experience in Cape Town. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise why so many of my respondents seemed to stress the gravity of acts of sexual violence against lesbians. In fact, a March 2009 ActionAid report on hate crimes in South Africa found that "while 44% of white lesbians from the Western Cape lived in fear of sexual assault, 86% of their black counterparts felt the same" (Martin et.al. 2009: 8). No wonder why three out of my four interviews with lesbians were filled with at least a couple minutes in which each woman listed some safety precautions she takes to protect herself on a daily basis.

Curative rapes are some of the worst human rights abuses in contemporary culture today. But potentially even worse than the act itself is what happens—or rather what does not happen—after the act has already been committed. One of the major issues with hate crimes against LGBT persons in Cape Town is the lack of reporting. In a poll of survivors of sexual orientation-bias hate crimes in South Africa's Western Cape, 66% of women said they did not report their attack because they felt they would not be taken seriously. Of these, 25% said they feared exposing their sexual orientation to the police and 22% said they were afraid of being abused (Triangle Project 2006: 78).

Mareldia, a self-identified coloured lesbian, took one of the most firm stances on the reporting of hate crimes that I encountered: "Hate crime is such a sensitive topic. If I were to be attacked now I personally wouldn't go to the cops [...] because what would come from that? More grief. I benefit nothing. I'll be the face of *that* girl." At first, such an apathetic reaction surprised me. But as I continued to ask other respondents about the reporting of hate crimes, I began to better understand why it has emerged as such a taboo in Cape Town. When speaking about why he would not report a crime committed against him, Ronel blamed the ways such crimes are covered by the media as his primary motivation to keep quiet: "And you know that the media in our society makes everything seem so pitied. You could be beaten up and have nearly died and it would seem like nothing to the media. And they would exploit it as in 'oh, she probably asked for it' and things like that. That's how bad local media is here."

For many LGBT individuals, however, it seems like there is a stigma around reporting hate crimes due to the fear that nothing will be done by the police when the crime is actually reported. David referred to this as "secondary victimization." He made sure to emphasize that we as a society cannot criticize the victim for not reporting, but rather we need to criticize larger social structures that prevent the victim from reporting. Such larger social structures include persisting homophobia in South Africa's patriarchal police system. As a result of this homophobia, many victims of hate crimes—including some of the persons I interviewed—encounter taunting and teasing at the police

station when they go to report a crime. Some even fear being abused by the police for trying to report a crime in the first place. And if the very people who are supposed to be protecting civil society don't have the best interest of LGBT persons in mind, then who does?

### *Looking for Solutions at the Local Level*

Clearly, attacks against LGBT individuals cannot persist. The one thing that nearly all of my respondents agreed on is the need for more LGBT-inclusive education and training workshops at the local level. Based on what I gathered from my interviews, the consensus seems to be that there is a general paucity of knowledge about issues of sexuality in Cape Town and South Africa on the whole. As a result, dominant heteronormative thinking patterns often cause gays and lesbians to be misperceived by the greater society. According to my respondents, however, this misperception could easily be rectified if individuals—as well as local organizations—did more to educate the general public.

Phumzile has seen the ramifications of this lack of education firsthand, especially among his neighbors living in Langa, a black township just outside Cape Town. His experiences interacting with individuals who are largely unfamiliar with LGBT issues were illustrated in more detail when he explained the relationship between socioeconomic class and one's level of education:

“When you compare the township and the city, it is different in a way. In the township, you live with people who are mostly uneducated so it's hard for them to understand certain things about being gay. So when you're in the city, at least you know that people do understand or some people do understand what being gay is and isn't about [...] So it differs based upon the type of environment you're in. It differs based on the people you associate yourself with.”

Thus, class plays an integral role in determining the opportunities available to an individual. However, many of my informants agreed that local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) could do a lot more to help provide education to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic class. Sadly, many NGOs in the sector have been criticized repeatedly for being dysfunctional, largely due to a lack of communication between NGOs themselves.

One area that NGOs certainly need to improve on is their outreach work in disadvantaged communities, most notably the townships. When speaking about training and education programs he has attended in the past, Siya noted that:

“Most people are not even aware that these programs exist. They don’t take place in the townships because Lord knows what would happen...since most township people are against being gay and whatnot. So there is not much information about these programs in the townships [...] Anything could happen. [The NGO workers] could get shot, they could get killed, they could get attacked because they are gay and lesbian groups.”

This underscores a much larger societal problem: if the very groups whose job it is to protect LGBT individuals and stand up for their well being are afraid to do advocacy work in the townships due to the persistent homophobia found there, then what are the LGBT individuals who actually live in these areas supposed to do? The programs that are already in place, programs created by organizations like The Triangle Project, are fantastic resources. However, if people do not know about them, then they will never be utilized. Many of the LGBT individuals living in the townships—individuals such as Siya, Nontombi, and Phumzile who need help the most—simply do not have the social mobility to attend events and trainings put on by local organizations near the city centre. These organizations thus have a responsibility to reach out to disadvantaged communities, a responsibility that most of my informants believe they are not currently fulfilling.

In addition to emphasizing their dissatisfaction with current outreach initiatives in Cape Town, many of my respondents wanted to stress that we need to make sure the right kinds of things are being taught in these workshops and programs organized by NGOs. Most LGBT and diversity trainings tend to focus on tolerance. Nevertheless, as David points out: “Tolerance is a poisonous word. It is acceptance, it is respect, that we need to talk about. Tolerance is not what we need.” Moreover, numerous respondents emphasized the need for sensitivity trainings in regard to the issues faced by lesbians in particular. Sadly, many only thought this would happen in an ideal world. But many also have a lot of hope for the future. As Susan exclaimed: “I do think it’s up to the gay community. I think there’s enough power, prestige, and money in the gay community to make it happen.”

Therefore, it seems like a solid portion of my informants—seven out of eleven to be exact—believe that grassroots mobilizing at the local level is one of the best ways to target many of the issues of discrimination faced by LGBT individuals. One of the most horrid of such issues is curative rape, which disproportionately affects nonwhite lesbians. With deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms in South Africa, many lesbians have found it difficult to fully express themselves and be visible in the LGBT community. Yet with adequate trainings and educations on the local level, facilitated by NGOs in the communities that need training the most, change may just be on the horizon. The next section now examines what role the national government plays (or should play) in the advancement of LGBT equality.

### **III. Where is Zuma? Government Involvement (or Lack Thereof) in LGBT Equality**

On an international scale, the South African government has been applauded by global hegemonies, the United States included, for its progressive social policies. As an American student coming to South Africa for the first time, I certainly thought that my own country could learn quite a bit about progressive, LGBT-friendly legislation from the South African government. Interestingly enough, it seems as if some South Africans hold a similar viewpoint about America. Ronel best summarized this train of thought by saying:

“America is the focus point of everything. America has such a great influence in everything. And that’s why when President Obama mentioned that he was supporting the gay rights movement I was like ‘Oh my word, if it’s going to happen there, it’s going to boil into all the other countries, especially our country because our country seems to mimic everything just because it wants to be on par with everything [...] and maybe we’d get like one step ahead, showing people that whatever you guys are going to do, we’re going to be doing too.’”

Ronel’s comments allude to the fact that the South African government may not be as progressive as it is made out to be on a global level. This section aims to explore gay and lesbian Cape-tonians’ perceptions of the South African government’s commitment to LGBT equality. It will also look towards the future of the LGBT equality movement in South Africa to speculate what the government can do to better ensure the safety of its LGBT citizenry.

### *The Importance of Hate Crime Legislation*

After conducting my interviews, one thing above all stood out: the desperate need for LGBT-inclusive hate crime legislation in South Africa. This would require the South African government to recognize hate crimes against LGBT persons as a specific crime category supported by the necessary resources to investigate and bring such crimes to court. Out of my eleven informants, ten explicitly said that curative rape against lesbians needs to be classified as a hate crime. When asked why this should be a priority, I received three primary answers.

Many of my informants seemed to believe that hate crime legislation listing enumerated categories of protection for LGBT individuals would make perpetrators think twice before committing a hate crime. But just passing legislation is not enough. Stephen, a self-identified white gay man, explained that: “Many South Africans are not well informed about the legislation currently on the books. So as great as it would be to pass hate crime legislation, the government would really have to advertise the policy change, as well as the ramifications of breaking the law. That way, people would know what they were getting themselves into before they decided to attack an LGBT person.”

Secondly, as David pointed out: “Hate crime legislation is important for maintaining statistics of crimes committed against LGBT persons. Right now most statistics are estimates. But with a law that creates a standard protocol for handling these crimes within the national criminal justice system, more accurate information will be gathered.” This accurate information is then crucial for holding the government accountable for the continuing violence within the nation.

Finally, hate crime legislation with enumerated categories for sexual orientation and gender identity would give LGBT South Africans more faith in their government. Mareldia explained that: “With the laws being in place it’s like a little blanket [...] it wraps us up and we have a law to cover us up and protect us from the dangers of the outside heterosexual world.” For Mareldia, just like millions of other LGBT individuals, feeling protected under the law is crucial to living a happy life, but not necessarily at the expense of being completely shielded from the rest of society. The South Afri-

can government needs to pass more LGBT-inclusive legislation to prove to LGBT South Africans that their voices do matter. And without doing so, Zuma's administration may just lose the votes of an increasingly powerful voting bloc in the country.

### *The Need for More LGBT Representation in Government*

Another common theme among my interviews was disappointment over the lack of openly gay and lesbian politicians in the South African government. This was a source of frustration for at least five of my respondents, who criticized the government for not fully representing the interests of all of its constituents. This sentiment was best expressed by Susan, who said:

"I just think if the local government was more inclusive—more representative—of the people they serve, then we'd have black, coloured, gay, straight, you know we'd have *representatives*. But I just feel that sort of ideology hasn't really taken root. I think having a predominately black government is appropriate in South Africa...but I would like to see more representative government, certainly on the local level *and* the national level. You know...more women, more gay women, more gay men, more independent, more green, more eco, more...you know, just concerned with the issues at hand. It's a macro government that doesn't really look at micro issues particularly."

The importance of having gay representation in government is certainly not just a South African phenomenon. In fact, the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund is an American organization with the mission of getting more openly gay politicians elected to public office. In its most recent annual report, the Fund explains how having openly gay public officials does indeed affect governmental policies (Victory Fund 2012). This point is reinforced by political scientist Donald Haider-Markel of the University of Kansas. His statistical analysis, published by Georgetown University Press in 2010, found that as more members of the LGBT community were elected to a state's legislature, the number of pro-LGBT bills introduced and adopted drastically rose (Page 2011).

It is thus very likely that a similar trend would occur in South Africa if more gay and lesbian politicians were to be elected to public office. Yet for some of my respondents, the lack of LGBT politicians in government is not only a concern due to issues of representation, but also due to issues of exposure and visibility in the public realm more generally. Oscar elaborated on this:

“I think it would actually be nice to have a few gay mayors or politicians. I don’t know if that will happen for awhile. Besides the entertainment industry, I don’t know of any *publicly* gay South Africans like gay CEOs or anything. I don’t think there are many South African gay role models. So I think that would help.”

Therefore, by having more LGBT individuals in positions of power, whether in government or not, it would help break down some stereotypes that dominate discourse on issues of sexuality in South Africa today. Not only would it help better represent the voices of LGBT individuals themselves—and hence facilitate the passage of LGBT-friendly legislation—but it would also provide LGBT individuals, both young and old alike, with role models to look up to, all while helping advance the education efforts that are so critical to LGBT progress in the country.

*Moving Forward: What is Next for South Africa and LGBT Equality?*

When asked about the future of the LGBT equality movement in South Africa, two voices stood out in particular. The first was that of Anne Marie, who was the only informant who seemed quite comfortable with the status of LGBT equality in South Africa. Living in Stellenbosch, a wealthy Afrikaner town outside of Cape Town, Anne Marie did not see much need for government involvement in the lives of LGBT persons, saying that: “I feel safe. I feel safe among my friends, my colleagues, my clubs, my societies, my neighbors. I feel safe in all those communities.” Although she did recognize that black LGBT individuals experience more discrimination than she does, she stated that being gay or lesbian is not a problem in coloured or white communities. This prompted her to advocate for the government taking a very hands-off approach to LGBT rights, reminding me that: “This is now coming from a libertarian viewpoint that there is quite enough legislation and anything can actually be dealt with existing legislation.”

But by the end of her interview Anne Marie’s feelings began to change. After admitting that she had never thought about the majority of these issues before she was explicitly asked about them simply due to a lack of exposure, Anne Marie explained: “[speaking with you] was very interesting because it also makes one think of many things. And one of the things that I’m wondering now is



whether the whole thing of doing more for the LGBT community, whether it's necessary or not. My original reaction, my immediate reaction, was let it be. And I'll definitely be chewing on that for awhile still." Not only do Anne Marie's comments allude to the fact that my research did indeed accomplish my main goal of starting a public dialogue and getting people thinking about issues of sexuality in Cape Town, but they also allude to the importance of reaching out to other cultures to learn about them.

The attitudes expressed by Anne Marie at the beginning of her interview are in stark contrast to those expressed by the other informants. Most of my other respondents did indeed recognize the accomplishments made by the government. But other than that, the majority were quite critical of the Zuma administration. Nontombi summarized the group's views best when she said:

"Most of these organizations, including the government, tend to be more reactive than proactive. Because they wait for something to happen before they can start saying 'ok, we're coming out there and seeing' or whatever. But if they would involve themselves in long-term projects whereby they do advocacy in the townships and actually be there when organizations such as Triangle come out. How about having a representative from the government come to one of the gay and lesbian pride marches or whatever? You don't see their faces. Which means yes, they're saying they're in support on paper but practically they're not in support at all."

Yet despite this frustration, there still remains a lot of hope for the future of LGBT equality in South Africa. After applauding the government for at least being prepared to engage in LGBT issues, David recognized that hate crime legislation simply is not a priority in a country with so many other problems. He closed his interview by telling me:

"But when you're dealing with poverty, lack of housing, poor delivery and distribution of resources—the country is just beset by problems—things tend to just slip under the agenda. It's almost overwhelming. But you just have to do your own little thing in your own way. Get the conversation going."

And in the end, that is really all anyone can do. So despite the obstacles that the country may still face, the fight for LGBT equality is certainly not over in South Africa. My interviews taught me that South Africans must remember that everyone shares the responsibility to advance equality, not just the government, not just the people, and not just community organizations or NGOs. Change is a

long process. But there has to be two processes occurring at the same time in order for any substantial change to be made: it has to be both a grassroots movement and one from the top.

## Conclusions

Although all the answers from my interviews could not be incorporated into this paper, there is enough evidence from the conversations to support the notion that heteronormative gender and sexuality norms play a vital role in shaping gay and lesbian Capetonians' perceptions of their own identities as well as the identities of others. Using the responses of eleven gay men and lesbian women who identify with a wide array of races, socioeconomic classes, and age groups, it can be seen that the state of LGBT equality in South Africa—as well as the South African government's commitment to LGBT equality—is constantly shifting.

The diverse political and social opinions of those vocal about LGBT equality in the country have helped contribute to the multifaceted nature of South African identity culture, a culture that embodies the importance of recognizing one's own positionality when engaging in public discourse on such sensitive topics. As the responses of my informants showcase, one's sexuality, race, gender, and class, as well as the intersectionality of such identities, all drastically affect one's opinions about controversial issues. Whether a person is able to recognize this effect or not, it is imperative to note that larger social narratives of homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism, among many other oppressive ideologies, all shape the relationship we have with our own identities. Yet by trying to remain cognizant of this relationship, we all will be better equipped to discuss such controversial topics in a much more interculturally competent and productive way.

The country of South Africa has clearly made vast strides in the fight for LGBT equality. Sadly, the protections that gays and lesbians are granted in the constitution do not always play out in reality, as seen by the high levels of violence and discrimination faced by these individuals. Nonetheless, fact remains that South Africa does indeed have one of the most progressive constitutions in the entire international community. And whether one agrees with the South African government's current commitment to LGBT equality or not, that constitution is certainly something to be celebrated.

## **Recommendations for Further Study**

Given the relatively short timeframe of this research project, I was not able to conduct as many interviews as I would have liked. I wish I could have stayed in Cape Town longer in order to actively engage the city and its LGBT residents for a more substantial segment of time. By being in the city longer, I would hopefully then be able to find more people to interview in order to learn about a greater array of personal experiences and potentially find a translator to help with my research as well, which would provide me with access to an even more diverse demographic. Moreover, the inclusion of transgender voices into the research would help better represent the LGBT community as a whole, rather than just focusing on the voices of gay men and lesbians. I also think an excellent opportunity for growth would be to work more closely with local LGBT advocacy and community organizations and interview key figures in those organizations. This would provide the researcher with an interesting comparative lens to better analyze individual responses and better understand current advocacy work already being done on the local level here in Cape Town.

If I had more time and resources, I think doing some sort of comparison between LGBT identity in Cape Town and LGBT identity in another major South African city such as Johannesburg or Durban could be an intriguing way to expand upon the research I already completed. Since Cape Town is often deemed to be the gay capital of Africa, I think it would be fascinating to see how the progress made in another South African city towards LGBT equality compares to the progress made in Cape Town. Despite the room for growth in my project, my observations, experiences, and the responses collected through personal interviews certainly provided me with enough information to write a cohesive Independent Study Project and I have found this entire process to be quite rewarding and fulfilling.

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Susan. Personal Interview. Sea Point, Cape Town, South Africa. 4 May 2013.

## Appendix A

### Informed Consent Form for Adult Respondents in English

#### Purpose of the Research

The South African government has made vast strides in the fight for LGBT equality, strides that are unparalleled by any other nation on the African continent. Unfortunately, the lack of hate crime legislation within the country—as well as the government’s unwillingness to address the nation’s resulting violence—often overshadows the accomplishments that have been made over the last few years. I therefore hope to use my Independent Study Project research to explore the gap that seems to exist between the expectations created by the South African government’s LGBT-inclusive protections and the reality of the LGBT individual’s lived experience. By working directly with Cape Town’s LGBT population through a series of informal interviews, I believe I can gain better insight into what it is like to be a LGBT person living in Cape Town amid an international movement to advance LGBT rights. This approach will hopefully allow me to work alongside current advocates and community workers to help create a public dialogue around finding solutions to the nation’s growing discrimination problem. Perhaps more importantly, it will provide me with the unique opportunity to challenge norms and ideologies that silence the experiences of the marginalized, a cornerstone of feminist and queer research.

#### Uses of the Research

Participant’s responses to interview questions will be the main source of data in my research. The information will be kept coded and secure before being entered into the formal Independent Study Project paper, and afterwards will be kept in a secure location. Before being used in the finished paper, the data will only be discussed between my research advisor Shifra Jacobson and myself. After the paper has been written, it will be given to professors at the School for International Training (SIT) for grading. If the paper passes through SIT’s ethical review board and rigorous grading, it may be published online at SIT’s website. The research will then be used as part of a Senior Honors Thesis at Washington University in St. Louis. Before being used in the final thesis, the data will only be discussed between my advisor Jean Allman and myself. The Honors Thesis will be reviewed by a committee of professors in the Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program. The final work will then be presented at the Undergraduate Research Symposium and an abstract of it will be published in the Washington University Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts.

#### Consent to Participate in the Study

I can read English. (If no, but can read Xhosa or Afrikaans, please supply. If participant cannot read, the onus is on the researcher to ensure that the quality of consent is nonetheless without reproach.)

I have read the information about this study and/or had it explained to me, and I fully understand what it says. I understand that this study is trying to find out the objectives stated above.

**I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I have a right to withdraw my consent to participate at any time without penalty.**

I understand and am willing that you will ask me questions about my:

- Gender and sexual identity and expression
- Experiences with discrimination, prejudice, and violence
- Opinions of the South African government’s role in the domestic and international LGBT equality movements
- Feelings towards the progression of the LGBT equality movement in general

I **do/ do not** require that my **identity (and name)** be kept secret. I understand that, if requested, my name will not be written on any questionnaire or in the final research document and that no one will be able to link my name to the data provided in interviews. If requested, my individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this study.

I understand that I will receive no compensation or direct benefit for participating in this study.

I confirm that the interviewer has given me the address of the nearest School for International Training Study Abroad office—18 Station Road, Rondebosch, Cape Town—should I wish to go there for information.



I know that if I have any questions or complaints about this study that I can contact anonymously, if I wish, the Director of the SIT South Africa Cape Town program, Stewart Chirova, at 078 586 5026.

I agree to participate in this study.

Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

## Instructions to Informants

I will be asking you a series of questions regarding your experiences as a member of the LGBT community in Cape Town and your opinions of the South African government's role in the progression of the LGBT equality movement. Please provide the most accurate and truthful information that you are comfortable sharing. I have a series of core questions to ask you, but I welcome any and all information you have regarding any discrimination and violence you may have experienced as a result of your gender and/or sexual identity. I aim for this to be an open and casual conversation, but if you begin to feel uncomfortable at any time for any reason, you may stop the interview and withdraw from the study without any penalty.

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Guide**

During the interview, informants will be asked questions such as:

Do you feel safe living in Cape Town as a member of the LGBT community? Why or why not?

How do you think your gender identity impacts your feeling of safety?

How do you think your sexual identity impacts your feeling of safety?

What role do you think the South African government plays in your feeling of safety?

What about the local government?

What are the steps you see as necessary for the government to take to help you feel safer?

Do you feel like the government is invested in your safety?

Do you think hate crime legislation would help protect LGBT South Africans? How so?

What role do local community organizations play in protecting LGBT individuals?

How would you respond to someone who said that homosexuality is “un-African”?